Features

Franklin prize for women scientists

The British government is taking seriously the lack of senior women scientists and the wasted talent that implies. **Nigel Williams** reports on new initiatives to encourage women in their careers and reward the very highest achievers.

The British government is ramping up efforts to address the career prospects of women working in science. Shortly after a woman has taken the reins at one of the country's key research councils, a new medal will award outstanding female scientists. It will be called the Franklin medal, after Rosalind Franklin who carried out key work on the structure of DNA in the 1950s. Three male scientists who helped establish the double-helix structure of DNA shared a Nobel prize for their breakthrough — based in large part on Franklin's detailed X-ray images of atoms — but she won little public recognition and her early death robbed her of later fame.

'Rosy' was dismissed in James Watson's account of the discovery, *The Double Helix*, and only recently has her reputation begun to be restored. Patricia Hewitt, the trade and industry secretary, has announced the new medal in her honour to raise the profile of other women scientists, with a £30,000 annual prize for exceptional innovation, which will be organised by the Royal Society.

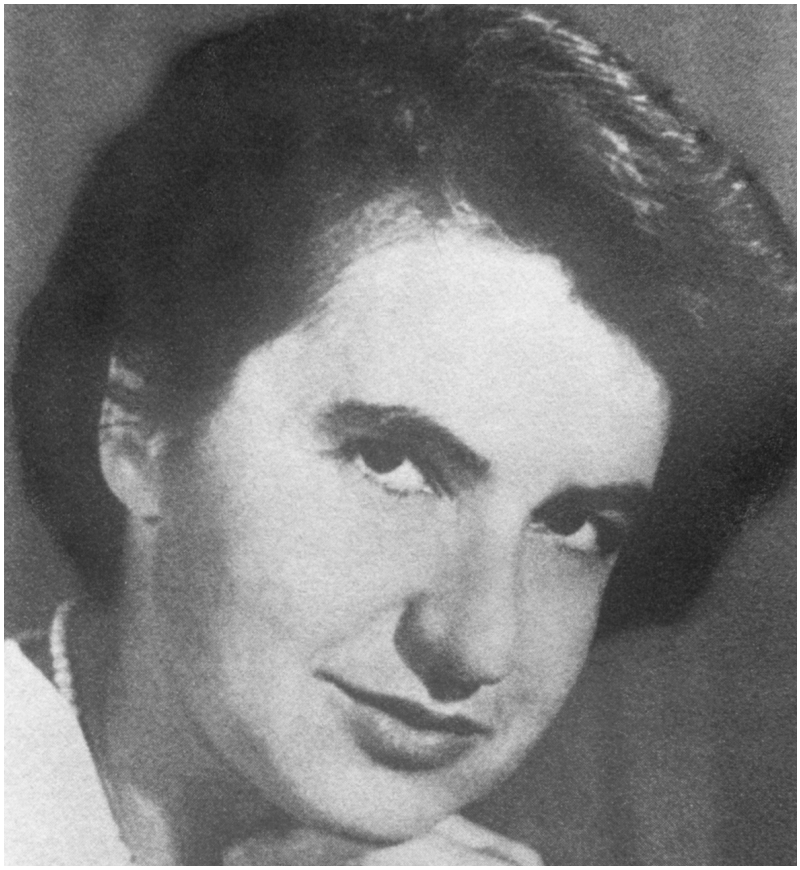
The prize tops deeper concerns that female talent is not getting through. A report published by the government at the end of last month, *Maximising Returns,* reveals that at any one time there are around 50,000 women science and engineering graduates not working, mostly after leaving to have children. Only a third of those who return from a career break take jobs that use their university qualifications. The government is contributing £105,000 to the Women in Science and Engineering Campaign and £80,000 towards a mentoring scheme with industry to encourage female scientists back to work.

Hewitt has also ordered an inquiry headed by Susan Greenfield, professor of pharmacology at the University of Oxford and director of the Royal Institution, into the barriers keeping women out of top science jobs.

Franklin, who died of ovarian cancer at the age of 37, faced the barriers Hewitt is now trying to overcome.

Franklin's break came when she joined King's College, London in 1950 to work on the DNA project as a crystallographer. Her partnership with Maurice Wilkins, who was seeking the structure of DNA like Francis Crick and James Watson, was strained. Apparently Wilkins resented her involvement, but when he showed her DNA images to Watson, their rival realised she was on the right track.

But it was not sexism that denied Franklin the Nobel prize in 1962; she died before it was awarded, and it is not given posthumously. But the prize can only be shared three ways, raising questions over whether she would have been given the credit had she lived. The government hopes the new medal will help create new recognition of her achievements.



Sidelined: Rosalind Franklin's key work on the structure of DNA at King's College, London failed to win the initial credit it warranted and her early death stymied subsequent recognition. (Photograph: Science Photo Library)